



Case Study:
Hawkins Mill Elementary and
Trezevant High, Memphis-
Shelby, Tennessee



Achieving Relentless Collective Efficacy

Two Tennessee schools overcome their challenges through
combined district-level and state-level interventions

When Tennessee introduced its School Turnaround Pilot Program Act of 2021, Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School in the Memphis-Shelby County Schools district were selected to be pilot schools. Both schools were struggling with chronic absenteeism and their students' academic performance ranked in the state's bottom 5%. As a result, the two schools had been on the state's list of priority schools since the list was created in the 2011–12 school year. “Priority school” is Tennessee's highest-stakes designation for low-performing schools.

Hawkins Mill and Trezevant are small urban schools on the northside of Memphis. Both schools are in underserved, low-income areas that are dealing with issues such as gangs and illegal drugs. Hawkins Mill serves more than 250 elementary students while Trezevant has a little over 450 students. A significant majority of the student populations at both schools are economically disadvantaged (89% for Hawkins Mill and 77% for Trezevant). In addition, Trezevant's graduation rate was consistently below the state requirement of 67%.

Partnering for school turnaround

As part of the four-year school turnaround pilot program, each of the two schools were required to partner with an external vendor approved by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). That vendor would help the school to conduct a comprehensive school analysis and develop a School Turnaround Plan. The vendor's turnaround specialists would also assist in implementing the improvement plan.

"We vetted the list of approved service providers and narrowed it down to the top two," said Dr. Thomas D. Rogers, the assistant superintendent of Memphis-Shelby County Schools. One of those two service providers was Cognia®, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that supports continuous improvement in schools around the globe.

"Even though this is an investment made by the Tennessee Department of Education, we wanted to make sure that we would be good stewards over the funds with which we were being entrusted," said Dr. Rogers. He and the schools' turnaround committees had the service providers deliver presentations outlining their plans to help Hawkins Mill and Trezevant exit the priority list.

Led by Dr. Connie Smith, vice president of Cognia's Office of School Transformation and state director for Tennessee, the nonprofit's team presented a two-fold approach for improving schools: the Cognia Diagnostic



Review and the Cognia School Turnaround model. Cognia's turnaround model uses a side-by-side, "boots on the ground" approach to implementation that emphasizes ongoing collaboration with educators in the schools and district. Additionally, Cognia tailors each of its turnaround teams to fit the needs of the school that the team serves.



Hawkins Mill and Trezvant each have a turnaround committee consisting of school faculty, students, parents or guardians, community partners, school board members, and district personnel. The School Turnaround Pilot Program Act tasked those committees with helping to develop the School Turnaround Plans. Both turnaround committees voted to work with Cognia. Memphis-Shelby's board of education unanimously approved the two contracts.

Diagnostic data collection

Cognia began working with the two schools in 2021. That year constituted the planning phase. The nonprofit's diagnostic review team examined both schools' previous action plans and relevant performance data, interviewed stakeholders, conducted classroom observations using Cognia's Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®), and observed the schools' operations.

Claude Wilson II, principal of Hawkins Mill Elementary, said that as soon as the Cognia Diagnostic Review team left, his teaching staff wanted to hear the team's feedback and recommendations. "They wanted to be able to implement strategies immediately," he reported.

“ Sometimes culture is a very tough nut to crack, but you can't do anything without being a part of the culture. So, you have to do a lot of listening on the front end. Trust: that's the key word. ”

Principal Wilson called the process not only informative but also “an eyeopener” in terms of the ways his staff could improve.

Trezvant High's principal, Eric Brent, was particularly appreciative of how the diagnostic review helped the school's math department. “The diagnostic review discussed the questioning and rigor in our math classes,” he said. “So, we were able to go back to the drawing board and come up with some strategies that helped us perform.”

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According to Principal Wilson, the action plans provided a framework that made it easier for school administrators and teachers to reach established goals within a set timeframe. In addition, they were better able to craft a roadmap for future goals and gauge how strategies were being implemented as well as how the changes affected students' learning and wellbeing. ”

Building strategic plans and plans of action

While the Cognia Diagnostic Review team carried out its work, the Cognia Turnaround team met with the schools' leadership teams, professional learning communities, teachers, and support staff to build the rapport and trust that would be required for moving forward with the school implementation plan.

As they conducted those collaborative conversations, Cognia Turnaround team members used the following four questions to pre-assess each school in four areas:

- What are they teaching?
- How are they teaching it?
- How long are they teaching it?
- How are they assessing it to know if they're being successful?

The Cognia Turnaround team combined the diagnostic review data with the input from school faculty, students, families, community partners, board members, and district personnel. Members of the team and turnaround committees worked together to create strategic plans that the schools now use to guide their improvement efforts and craft yearly goals in the following areas:

- Building leadership capacity
- Teaching and learning
- School and community engagement
- Resources

The Cognia Turnaround team also worked with the schools' staff to “chunk” the strategic plans into 30-, 60-, and 90-day Action Improvement Plans. Every quarter, Principal Wilson and Principal Brent report their progress on the action plans to the TDOE.

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Growing by Steps, Leaps, and Bounds

Measurement is an important and necessary component of improvement. The measurement of student and school outcomes provides evidence of improvement and demonstration of the ongoing attainment of goals. State and federal accountability systems annually report on a variety of student and school outcomes to identify low and underperforming schools in need of improvement. As previously described, both Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School were identified as in the bottom 5% of schools, therefore listed as “Priority.” All Priority schools receive additional support and funds to aid in improvement activities. Still, in many instances, schools identified under such designations are often reidentified year after year, unable to meet the state or federal exit criteria. In 2023, both Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School met Tennessee’s exit criteria and were removed from the list of Priority schools. This demonstration of improved academic and non-academic outcomes for their students marks the end of 13 years of state identification. Though continuous improvement is just that, continuous, both schools are able to celebrate a significant milestone in their improved results.

To fully examine the degree of effectiveness in the improvement efforts and activities of Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School, it is worth further unpacking indicators of student performance and growth. While state assessment data are only one data point and often a lagging indicator following improvement interventions, understanding student performance, particularly relative to similar schools and districts can serve as a clear, useful, and meaningful marker regarding the success and value of improvement actions.

Tennessee uses a value-added growth model, Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) as one such measure of student performance, focused on the impact of schools and teachers on students’ academic progress. The measure uses available assessment data from K–2 assessments, grades 3–8 assessments, and high school end-of-course (EOC) assessments. This growth-centered measure can be used to help evaluate whether students are improving, particularly relative to students in similar schools. In 2023, both Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School demonstrated striking growth, not only compared to other state-identified schools, but even when comparing

to all schools in Tennessee. While in some instances we see moderate growth in Hawkins Mill and Trezevant compared to all Tennessee schools, there is considerable growth worth celebrating—in some cases leaps and bounds above their peers and the full comparison group.

Hawkins Mill Elementary School

Leading in Literacy, emerging in Math

When examining relative student growth, particularly in historically underperforming, state-identified schools, it is important to examine growth rates and values, alongside a peer group. Therefore, this analysis includes comparisons of Hawkins Mill’s TVAAS growth compared to all other state-identified elementary schools (i.e., its “peers”) as well as all Tennessee elementary schools (see table below). To better understand the meaning of the TVAAS growth scores, growth percentile ranks were calculated for both peer schools and all schools. Growth percentile ranks take the subject- and grade-specific growth scores and apply rank order, where 1.00 would correspond to the 100th percentile or the highest growth score within the group. Therefore, a school with a 0.80 growth percentile rank would have a higher growth score

ELA			MATH		
Hawkins Mill growth percentile rank across state-identified schools (n=20)		Hawkins Mill growth percentile rank across all schools (n=1399)	Hawkins Mill growth percentile rank across state-identified schools (n=20)		Hawkins Mill growth percentile rank across all schools (n=1399)
All Grades	0.95	0.98	All Grades	0.30	0.30
Grade 3	1.00	0.95	Grade 3	1.00	0.94
Grade 4	0.70	0.80	Grade 4	0.50	0.49
Grade 5	0.95	0.96	Grade 5	0.20	0.31

than 80% of the schools within the group.

Compared to its peer schools, Hawkins Mill demonstrated astounding growth, particularly in English Language Arts (ELA). Across all grades, Hawkins Mill had the second highest growth, outperforming 95% of its peers. In grade 3 ELA, they exhibited the highest grade 3 ELA growth score of any state-identified school. Grades 4 and 5 ELA also presented impressive growth at the 70th and 95th percentiles, respectively. While Math growth across all grades was more modest, Hawkins Mill had the highest grade 3 Math growth of any state-identified school and average growth in grade 4 Math.

Hawkins Mill demonstrated remarkable growth, outperforming even Tennessee's historically high-performing and more affluent schools. Across-grade ELA growth was at the 98th percentile, meaning Hawkins Mill showed more ELA growth than 98% of all Tennessee elementary schools in 2023. Grade-level specific ELA growth was similarly impressive at 95th (grade 3), 80th (grade 4), and 96th (grade 5). Math growth reflects a similar pattern across all schools as within the peer group, with a strong showing in grade 3 at the 94th percentile and average in grade 4 (49th percentile). These data suggest that the investments, strategies, and efforts undertaken by Hawkins Mill and its community are yielding positive gains.

Trezevant High

Steady growth across all subjects

High school assessments in Tennessee are administered by course completion, as opposed to assigned grade level. These end-

End-of-course subject	Trezevant Growth percentile rank across state-identified schools (n varies by subject)	Trezevant Growth percentile rank across all schools (n varies by subject)
English I	0.78 (n=9)	0.49 (n=385)
English II	1.00 (n=10)	0.92 (n=377)
Biology	0.90 (n=10)	0.77 (n=383)
Algebra I	0.67 (n=9)	0.57 (n=477)
Algebra II	0.67 (n=9)	0.39 (n=325)
Geometry	0.67 (n=9)	0.17 (n=349)

of-course (EOC) tests are used to generate TVAAS growth scores and were similarly ranked to examine Trezevant's relative growth compared to its peer schools and all schools. Note that due to the subject-specific nature of the EOC tests, not all high schools had a growth score for each subject. Therefore, n counts are noted at each subject-test-level.

When looking across other state-identified high schools, Trezevant emerges as the leader in English II growth (100th percentile) and a strong performer in both Biology (90th percentile) and English I (78th percentile). Further, across each Math subject-test, Trezevant performs at the 67th percentile, indicating more growth than two-thirds of other state-identified schools. Across all EOC tests, Trezevant's growth was higher than the majority of all state-identified schools, ranging from the 67th to 100th percentile.

Trezevant's notable performance particularly in English II and Biology are also reflected in an all school comparison. Trezevant's English II growth was higher than 92% of all high schools in Tennessee. Similarly, they demonstrated more Biology growth than 77% of other schools. Though they were below the 50th percentile (i.e., average) growth in English I, Algebra II, and Geometry when comparing to all schools, we note that

among identified schools, Trezevant continues to excel.

Continuous Improvement Needs Continuous Measurement

Examining multiple measures helps us understand what is working and where additional opportunities remain. As no one single data point or measure can tell a full story, it is imperative to continue monitoring, measuring, and evaluating. Student growth data shows that both Hawkins Mill and Trezevant have made significant progress in the academic gains of their students. Coupled with exiting Priority status (i.e., no longer identified as in the bottom 5% of schools), both schools have demonstrated significant improvement across multiple facets of student and school outcomes. Although official data on individual accountability indicators are not yet available for the 2022–2023 school year, the removal of Priority status indicates measurable improvement across indicators such as academic achievement, growth, chronic absenteeism, and graduation. Though their work is ongoing, celebrations abound for both schools and their communities, as they reflect on the results of their shared, collaborative efforts to meet the needs of their students.

Pursuing success through collaborative conversations

Both Hawkins Mill Elementary and Trezevant High are members of Dr. Roger's Innovation Zone (IZone) turnaround program. The IZone provides participating schools with a centralized support team that includes principal supervisors, principal coaches, managers, and content leaders in the areas of ELA, math, and science. Schools receive instructional support, resources, and professional development based on their needs.

Under Dr. Rogers' leadership, the IZone has earned a strong reputation for transforming low-performing schools. In fact, the program's tagline is "Winning with relentless collective efficacy."

Cognia Turnaround team members understood that as the outsiders, their job was to listen, learn, and add value for the teachers and leaders of Hawkins Mill and Trezevant. Therefore, the team members attended the IZone training sessions to better understand the vocabulary, culture, and practices that were already in place. They wanted to use the same language as the district to add value to the work already in progress with the IZone.

IZone and school educators had developed the practice of building alliances with external partners. The Cognia Turnaround team followed suit. They worked with the IZone team to establish partnerships with outside agencies such as the Tennessee Home Builders Association and Jobs for Tennessee Graduates. Those institutions provided Trezevant high schoolers with a paid Summer Scholarships program, certified training, and a vocation certification with a job following graduation. Those scholarships, training, and certifications helped the students to see their education as meaningful.

Job-embedded professional development

As the Cognia Turnaround team members started sharing suggestions and insights at the IZone training sessions, they further gained the confidence of Dr. Rogers and the IZone staff. As a result, Dr. Rogers encouraged the Cognia team to deliver professional development of their own.

Whenever Cognia's Dr. Smith and her turnaround team determined a need at either Hawkins Mill or Trezevant, the team responded with tailormade professional development. Those "job-embedded" professional development sessions took place when there was an opening in staffers' monthly schedules – during extended days, planning sessions, or in teachers' professional learning communities. The team followed up the sessions with classroom observations during which they often modeled relevant practices with the teachers' permission.

Principal Wilson reported that the training helped immensely with fulfilling the action plans. "We were able to have professional developments around tasks required in the 30-day plan, 60-day plan, etc.," he said.

One of the topics covered by the training was creating a standards-based classroom. The Cognia Turnaround team had found that the schools' faculty were often using workbooks and other content resources that were not aligned to the standards that would be assessed. They also found that teachers and students would benefit if more time were allotted to teaching the content standards. The standards-based classroom training helped teachers "unpack" the language of relevant standards so that they could better ensure that their instruction met the state's requirements.

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Cognia also helped Hawkins Mill and Trezevant staffers resolve some culture differences that were impeding teacher-family communication. While most of the students at both schools are economically disadvantaged, many of their teachers are middle class. That difference in life experiences had led to some unintended misunderstandings, especially during teacher-caregiver conversations. Dr. B.J. Worthington, one of the Cognia team members, led a discussion on how to engage those stakeholders. The talk centered around strategies and insights put forward by the noted researcher Dr. Ruby Payne, and discussing those ideas helped teachers better understand the values, attitudes, and language of students' families.

Delving deeper with a summer retreat

While the Cognia Turnaround team could tweak educators' practices during the semester, teachers' heavy workload hindered more intensive training during that time. As the district's assistant superintendent and the IZone leader, Dr. Rogers had implemented a

yearly IZone Summer Learning Institute. Dr. Smith and her team conferred with him about providing their own summer training for Trezevant High as well, and he agreed.

In the summer of 2022, Trezevant's administrators and instructional team joined the Cognia Turnaround team for a two-day tailormade professional development workshop focused on using student performance data to plan for improvement. "We were able to have 10 teachers, administrators, Dr. Smith, Dr. Worthington, and Dr. Celeta Watson [another key member of the Cognia Turnaround team] meet," said Principal Brent. "It was just us and our minds and being able to dig deeper into what's important for a high school."

He reported that he appreciated having that time to bounce ideas and problem-solve with Dr. Smith and Dr. Worthington. "Both are previous superintendents," he said. "They know the work. They provided the knowledge they have utilized over the course of their years of being educators. We were able to start the school year on a very positive note and be very aggressive with implementation."



The schools' collaborative work with Cognia and the IZone has paid off. For example, Hawkins Mill Elementary's counselor served as a pivotal liaison with outside partners for the creation of a program incentivizing school attendance. Between 2022 and 2023, the school's absenteeism rate dropped from 20% to 5%. (Trezevant High started a similar program during that period).

Trezevant High met the state-required graduation rate of 67% during the 2021–22 school year. In addition, the percentage of chronically absent students fell from 38.3% in the 2020–21 school year to 29.4% in the 2021–22 school year.

Even though Cognia's Turnaround team will leave both schools at the end of the turnaround program, their mission is to build the school staffers' capacity for continuing the improvement process. Therefore, during 2024, the team will focus on enhancing the schools' ability to sustain effective teaching and learning habits. The results mentioned above are positive early indications of the capacity for improvement becoming established in both schools.

Focusing on a collaborative approach with the educators in Hawkins Mills, Trezevant, and the IZone has ensured that school faculty and leadership are able to keep moving forward in a unified manner rather than trying to fulfill “scattershot” requirements. Dr. Smith noted that the nonprofit's approach to turnaround is much more involved and shoulder-to-shoulder than that of other vendors. “They're not doing what we're doing,” she said. “We've even been before the legislature with the state department, which is unusual.”

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She credits the effectiveness of the approach to the relationships that Cognia's Turnaround team first focuses on building. "You've got to trust the people," she said. "After all, it's not my school. It's their school. Sometimes culture is a very tough nut to crack, but you can't do anything without being a part of the culture. So, you have to do a lot of listening on the front end. Trust: that's the key word."

Dr. Rogers said that he appreciated Cognia's staunch partnership. "From the leadership development to the teacher development to garnering more parent and community support—we walk in lockstep," he said. "It never seems like it's disjointed. It always feels like just a true partnership."



Thomas D. Rogers, Ed.D., is a lifelong Memphian and has spent the past 20 years in public education. Dr. Rogers has matriculated to the district office in Memphis-Shelby County Schools, in the Office of Schools, where he serves as Assistant Superintendent for IZone 3.0/Priority Schools. In this role, he coaches and supervises principal supervisors, content managers, and highly specialized advisors in a portfolio of assigned schools.

About Cognia

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